SIR HUMPHRY ROLLESTON'S LIFE OF ALLBUTT

The Right Honourable Sir Thomas Clifford Allbutt, K.C.B. A memoir by Sir Humphry Davy Rolleston, Bart, vi, 1 l., 314 pp., 8, London, MacMillan & Son, 1929. 15/.

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Written for physicians by a physician about a physician, this is, in all probability, the best medical biography of the year. Its ornate, somewhat old-fashioned title suggests the remote post-Georgian day in which Allbutt was born; yet he not only lived through the World War period but well beyond it and, nigh to the age of ninety, remained, as always, fresh, rosy-cheeked, well-groomed, alert, sane, sound and up to the minute ("Yorkshire too"). He is thus, at once, very near to us and very far from us; for although, like Ambroïse Paré, witnessing the events of a century in the span of his life, he died, an old-fashioned gentleman in manner, but, in his modes of thought, an essentially modern man. In the year 1836, Victoria had not yet ascended the throne, the University of London was just beginning, Marsh was trying out his test for arsenic, the Webers were investigating locomotion, Bright had localized acute yellow atrophy of the liver, Sir Humphry Davy discovered acetylene, Cruveilhier, investigating phlebitis, was called to the first chair of pathology in the Paris Faculty and Boucher des Perthes had started to investigate the remains of prehistoric man. In 1925, Europe was beginning to recover from its war-wounds, while cholecystography, ventriculography, B. C. G., ultraviolet irradiation in rickets, insulin fattening and hyperventilation epilepsy were already known and Whipple and Robscheit-Robbins were experimenting with liver diet in pernicious anæmia. In less than 300 pages, Sir Humphry Rolleston contrives to tell all that is known of this long life, a quiet and uneventful one, be it said, and difficult to relate by reason of the utter lack of early records; for Allbutt, his biographer tells us, "kept very few records, did not write a diary or leave any unpublished reminiscences, and very few of his early contemporaries are now alive." Boyhood in Yorkshire and

Suffolk vicarages, school-days at York, B.A. (1859), M.B. (1861) and M.D. (1869) at Cambridge, a year in Paris with Trousseau, Duchenne, Hardy and Bazin (1860), twenty-eight years practice at Leeds (1861-89), marriage (1869), Commissioner in Lunacy (1889), Regius Professor of Physic at Cambridge (1892-1925), foreign travel, Alpine climbing, lecturing in America, clinical investigation, and most incomparable writing—that is all there is to Allbutt's life, and yet its simple story is alluring from end to end. It is the story of one in whom the grand old name of gentleman suffered no abjection or abasement, who was, *comme caractère,* one of the best and kindliest men who ever lived, one of the ablest of modern clinicians, whose religious feeling was deep because unostentatious, yet endowed with the proverbial Yorkshire keenness and practising literature as a fine art, with the single exception of Huxley, perhaps the most original English writer in our profession. In his childhood, he knew Charlotte Bronte, had seen the other sisters, and describes Charlotte as dull and insignificant as "the lamp-bracket which holds the light," Emily as "gey ill to live wi," Anne as tame and imitative, Patrick as "a bad egg," and otherwise "just negligible, save as a thorn in other people's flesh." Of Emily's *flair* for the wild and monstrous (in *Wuthering Heights*), he says: "These folk have some uncanny insight, a Cuvier-like faculty of *ex pede Herculem.*" His student reminiscences of Trousseau and Duchenne are equally vivid. In September, 1868, George Eliot described Allbutt as "a good, clever and graceful man, enough to enable one to be cheerful under the horrible smoke of ugly Leeds." In August, 1869, she was beginning *Middlemarch.* It is no secret that much of Allbutt went into Lydgate, although he always "observed a somewhat sphinx-like expression" about it. His was, in fact, the logical opposite of a life drained to extinction by a basil-plant. Jocund and content in his family life, he described the frequent reunions of his domestic foursome (Lady Allbutt, his adopted daughter, his sister and himself) as "our family square."

Allbutt was a pioneer in the open air treatment of fevers (1865-6) and in the employment of the opthalmoscope in internal disorders (1867-71); he introduced the short, handy clinical thermometer, in other words, brought the instrument into general use (1867); he first described syphilis of the cerebral arteries (1862-72; Heubner, 1874), the first case of Charcot's tabetic joint lesion in England (1869); he was the first to note the role of mental anxiety in the causation of renal (better cardio-renal) disease (1876), was a great authority on all phases of disorders of the circulation and, in 1894-5, ascribed angina pectoris to aortic lesion (Corrigan, 1837) and isolated hyperpiesia or "senile plethora" as essential arterial hypertension of non-renal or non-arteriosclerotic origin. Twenty years before Charcot, Allbutt noted that disease of the most disparate type may be widely distributed in space and time, among a given patient's ascendants, descendants and relatives, usually pivoting around the purpuras and polymorphic erythemas as serial members of the gouty, rheumatoid, neurosyphilitic or tubercular diatheses (1867). Patients are thus, as Charcot affirmed, "only an accident" in the familial distribution of a major disease in space and time, like individual members of a finite mathematical series. This is the basic thought in Allbutt's three essays on classification of diseases (1867, 1888, 1906), the most original ever written on the subject, demolishing the false notion of a "clinical entity" by stressing the patient as the real thing, and pregnant with the medicine of the future. In keeping with all this was his unrivalled clinical approach, as described by one of his colleagues:

"His bedside manner could never have been surpassed. . . . He was always hopeful, even in the most hopeless cases and always left the patient with the feeling that not only was there considerable cause for hopefulness, but that the patient was the one person and the one case in which Dr. Allbutt was specially interested. It is needless to say that all the most desirable of the general practitioners were both happy and proud to meet him in consultation. He never let a man down."

In the beautiful sentences expressing his love for music, Allbutt seemed, in fact, to be describing the effect of his

own benign personality: "So the master came; appearing and disappearing like a wraith, but a wraith under a radiant halo of illumination. He lifted us up in an organ glory which none of us had known, before or since." During his Leeds period, Allbutt realized an income of £4000-£6000 a year. It came to be said in professional circles that "no good Yorkshireman would rest quietly in his grave if, before his death, he had not been seen by Clifford Allbutt." His teaching in the wards is described as "a series of exquisite thumb-nail clinical lectures." Examples are his views on overwork of the heart, and athletes gone stale, his rule for stopping thrombosis in typhoid fever (communicated to Thayer, 1925), his sympathy with dunces ("our vacuous minds") and his suspicion of juvenile prodigies, his use of morphine in cardiac dyspnœa, his "large basin of really good bouillon and then tumble into bed" for overstrained Alpine climbers and his sound reasoning about the athletic monomania, the sexual pruriency and the mechanized sexuality of our present period. "Tenderness, gratitude, love are more to us than two arms, two legs or two lungs; moreover the higher gifts of the imagination may be found in the frailest or the humblest vessels." In the history of medicine, Allbutt stands quite alone, as the most original, informing and suggestive of all English writers on the subject. To make an anthology of his best essays on medicine and its history, as Maude Abbot proposes for Osler, would seem a fitting and desirable pendant to a biography so thoughtfully conceived and so happily executed.

Allbutt's letters to me were the most encouraging I have received in life and I shall never forget the great hearted gentleman who wrote them. *Omne individuum ineffabile.*